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ABSTRACT

Noting that the rate of grade retention has risen nearly 40 percent over the past 20 years, this case study examines whether being retained for 1 school year helps children academically by giving them more practice and time to succeed or harms their self-esteem and causes them to eventually drop out of school. Participating in the study were five students who were repeating the fifth grade, three boys and two girls, with varied SES and ethnic backgrounds. Data were collected through student interviews, parent surveys, examination of information in student records, and classroom observations. Parent surveys were also sent to parents of the nonretained students in the class. Profiles were derived for each student, including scores on standardized achievement tests. Findings indicated that parents of three of the five retained students thought that another year in fifth grade would help their child be ready for middle school. Almost all parents in both groups thought their children had high self-esteem and had friends in class. Some of the parents of retained students believed their children were not doing as well in school as they had been and did not have positive attitudes toward school in general. Students' responses to retention varied greatly, as did their feelings about school. Factors other than retention could have influenced students' attitudes. Students and parents generally responded in the same ways regarding school progress and attitudes. (KB)

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Retention, Helpful or Harmful?: A Look at How Or If Grade Retention Affects Children in School

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Johnny wakes up at six o'clock on the first day of school. He's all excited about wearing his new clothes and his brand new Nike shoes. He has on his new cool backpack and is carrying his new Bronco's lunchbox. He can't wait to see his old friends, meet his new teachers in his new school, when it finally dawns on him. He isn't going to middle school with all his friends. He has to repeat the fifth grade at the same old elementary school that he's been going to for six years now. "Mom, I don't want to go to school. I should be in sixth grade with my friends. I must be the stupidest kid in the world!", he screamed. "Now come on Johnny, we talked about this already. This extra year is going to help you do well in middle school. Anyway, I'm sure you weren't the only kid retained in the fifth grade with all the benchmark tests there were to pass," answered Mom, trying to be logical.

With the push for academic excellence and achievement of benchmarks, more children are being retained in their current grade, completing the year again, until they pass certain criteria. The rate of grade retention has risen nearly 40% over the past 20 years. Many teachers believe that retention, especially in the early grades, is an effective remediation strategy for poor school performance and may reduce the later chance of school failure. However some research on grade retention concludes that repeating a grade provides few remediation benefits and may place students at a higher risk of dropping out of school (Roderick, 1995). My reason for doing this case study is to find out, whether being retained for one school year helps a child academically by giving them more practice and time to succeed, or does it instead harm their self-esteem and cause them to eventually drop out of school?

Retention is a hot topic today, especially in Florida recently with the high stakes tests that are causing more retentions to occur for students who have not managed to master the benchmarks. Benchmarks, in Florida, are when students in second, fifth, eighth, and tenth grades

have to pass certain tests in applied reading, writing and mathematics before they can pass to the next grade level. The benchmarks used for these tests come from the Sunshine Standards, a list of objectives students need to meet at each grade level. Students also take the Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test (FCAT) in fourth grade for writing and reading, and fifth grade for reading and math. The scores from these tests and other criteria such as attendance and number of behavior referrals, are used to give the schools in Florida a grade from A to F.

With the number of retentions continually rising, we need to look deeply into research and our children to see if and how retention affects children and their future. Retention may have long term effects on self-esteem and it may increase the potential for school drop-outs. Grade retention is making a come-back as a popular method of remediation for poor academic performance. As teachers and principals are held more accountable for student performance, retention is increasingly viewed as a key instrument of school reforms around the country (McCoy & Reynolds, 1999).

Wiles and Bondi (2000) state that the principle behind "failing" or "holding a child back" seems to be that low achievement at a grade level is more traumatic than being placed with younger age students. In their book of supervision, these researchers provide many salient facts that are relevant to my own case study. For example, they say that studies show that about 5 to 7% of public school students are being retained annually, and that 16% of all students will be retained two times before they get to the sixth grade. The annual cost of retaining 2.4 million children has been estimated at $10 billion. Nearly 600 studies of retention have been conducted with few supporting the practice of retaining students. Major reviews of these studies haven't found any evidence to support this practice. Wiles and Bondi also say that some studies have shown that students who are retained seem to come from a similar background of disadvantaged

students, minorities, and males. Students in the South with behavior problems are more likely to be retained. The effects of retention have been widely documented. Dropouts are five times more likely to have repeated a grade and students who are retained twice have virtually no chance of graduating from high school. Other negative results of retention that have been documented include poor school adjustment, low self-esteem, low school attendance, more behavior problems and less popularity. A major California study documented that there are no academic benefits from retaining students.

Background Information

My rationale for doing this case study is that I am interested in this topic because I have a number of students in my class this year that are repeating the fifth grade. I want to know how being retained effects their self-esteem and to see if the extra year is helping them academically and, if so, how exactly. As a future administrator, I would like this information to help me make future decisions for students that might possibly need to be retained. More information would help me know if the increasing number of students being retained is positive or negative.

I teach fifth grade at Green Fields Elementary School, a school in a middle class neighborhood in Florida. I have 29 students in my class, which consists of a mixture of races and socioeconomic status and backgrounds. There are five students in my class who are repeating the fifth grade. The group consists of three boys and two girls. Three of them are Caucasian, one is African American, and one is Hispanic. Their socioeconomic status and backgrounds are varied.

In order to conduct this study, I interviewed the five students and sent a survey home to parents asking for their opinion on the effects of retention. I also looked in their cumulative folders for current and past academic information, any special testing that was done and any

other pertinent information that might help my feel for how the child is doing this year academically and socially and how he or she did in the past. I observed the students in the classroom for work habits, interaction with fellow classmates, and the extent to which they're completing assignments in class and at home.

I also looked at the support system the children have at home and at school. I tried to get a picture of the whole child and how they're doing this year and how it differs from how they did last year. I looked at what kind of family situation they have such as, single parent, two parents, or other type of situation. I looked at how much their parents help them with their homework.

Profiles of Retained Students

Scott Campbell is a Caucasian boy who resides with both parents. His grades in fifth grade last year were N's and U's in reading, writing and mathematics. His test scores for FCAT are shown on Table 1. Scott is having trouble with motivation, often not wanting to do his work in class. He often has difficulty getting along with his classmates. His grades for the first marking period this year is an N in reading academically, but has passed the reading benchmark with a score of 6.1 (only needing a score of 4.0 to pass), a U in writing, still not passing the benchmark of 3.0 on Florida Writes (a writing test students must pass in fourth grade where they are given a narrative or expository prompt and are scored based on a rubric from 0 to 6), and an N in mathematics.

Jennifer Rhodes is a Caucasian female who lives with her mother only, and has been identified as having a specific learning disability. Last year, her report card showed that she was reading on a third grade level, writing on a fourth grade level, and received N's (needs improvement) and U's (unsatisfactory) in mathematics. (See Table 1 for test scores.) Jennifer works hard completing most of her classwork and homework. She is currently receiving third

grade level work in reading, fourth grade level work in writing, and is doing satisfactory in math. She is well behaved in class and has many friends.

Jeffrey Stone, an African American boy, lives with both of his parents. His fifth grade report card last year consisted of C's in reading, writing and mathematics, and U's in benchmark progress. (See Table 1 for test scores.) Jeffrey has been trying very hard this year to get good grades, completing all of his classwork and most of his homework. He is well-behaved in class and gets along with fellow classmates. Jeffrey received N's in reading, writing and mathematics and unsatisfactory in benchmark progress on his report card for the first marking period.

Nickolas Green is a Caucasian boy who lives with both parents and has been identified as having a specific learning disability. His report card last year showed him working at a third grade level in reading and writing, he received a C in mathematics, and a U in benchmark progress. This year so far he's working on a third grade level for reading, fourth for writing and on grade level for mathematics receiving a C. He works very hard and finishes his work daily, is well-behaved and gets along well with his classmates.

The last student is Alyssa Harper, a Hispanic female, who lives with her father and stepmother. In fifth grade last year, she received an N in reading, a C in writing and an N in mathematics. This year she received a C in reading and is on grade level with a 6.2 reading score, a C in writing and a C in mathematics for the first marking period. She is well behaved and works hard to finish her assignments in class.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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Relevant Research Regarding Retention

An example of the significant research done on grade retention is one done by Johnson, Mearell and Stover (1990) on the effects of early grade retention on the academic achievement of fourth graders. The study looked at 57 fourth grade students in a western state, 20 of the 57 were retained in either kindergarten or first grade, 17 students who had been recommended but not retained and 20 students who were neither recommended nor retained. They concluded that early grade retention was not effective as an academic intervention for the retained group. There was no significant difference between retained and non-retained group in test scores or grades.

Hagborg and Masella (1991) conducted a follow-up study of 38 high school students with a history of repeating (prior to eighth grade). Data was gathered from test scores, IQ tests, grade point average and a student questionnaire. On the school record data, the retained students reported significantly lower on measures of academic achievement, intelligence tests and grades. On the reported student data, retained students reported significantly lower grades and lower self-esteem on three subscales of SPPA. It was found that the later students were retained, the more they were associated with lower grades, less positive school attitudes, lower educational expectations, and lower self-control.

Rust and Wallace (1993) conducted a study on the effects of grade retention for four years of 120 students from a large southern metropolitan school district. Half of the students had been retained one time and the other half had never been retained, despite poor achievement. The cumulative records were examined and recorded for gender, SES, race, grade retention, grades for reading, math, and language, as well as achievement tests. The retained group was significantly below the promoted group prior to the retention decision. One year later, the

retained group's achievement scores were significantly higher than the promoted group. There was no significant difference between the groups two and three years later. Results indicated retention led to higher achievement during repeated year but leveled off after the second year.

Roderick (1994) conducted a study on grade retention from Fall River, Massachusetts. Detailed data was collected for each student from fourth grade to drop out, transfer, or graduation. They found students who repeated grades were much more likely to drop out than those who were never retained. Close to 70% of students who repeated one grade between kindergarten and eighth grade dropped out compared to 27% of those who never repeated a grade. Students who repeated two or more grades were almost exclusively drop-outs.

Further, Fink, Gottfredson, and Graham (1994) conducted a study of retention effects on nonacademic outcomes for students enrolled in grades 6 and 7 in two southern, urban middle schools. The population was African American and educationally and socio-economically disadvantaged. Forty seven percent of students were at the appropriate grade level, 19% were repeating a grade. The study compared retained students with students who were promoted. They collected data from school records, teacher ratings and a student survey. Results showed being retained had no significance on educational expectations, positive peer associations, social integration, positive self-concept, attention to schoolwork, or classroom disruption.

Data Collected from Surveys and Interviews

Parent Survey

I developed an original parent survey consisting of statements that would let me know how the parents of the retained students are feeling about this school year and how their children are doing academically and socially in school. I sent the parent survey home to gain insight into parents' feelings and so I could compare them with the responses their child made during my

interviews. I decided to send the survey home with all students, retained and non-retained, in order not to single out certain children and to be able to compare results. I received back 28 out of the 29 surveys that I sent home.

The first statement on the parent survey was "My child is doing better academically this year." From the retained group, the results were very different; one strongly disagreed, one somewhat disagreed, one was not sure, and two somewhat agreed. My instincts tell me it was partly due to the time of year, being only October, parents want to see their next report card grades and how well they do on tests before saying they're doing better this year. The response for non-retained was also varied, but most agreed their child was doing better this year.

The second statement on the survey was "I feel an extra year in the fifth grade will help my child be ready for middle school." For the retained students, all the parents answered they strongly disagree. One parent wrote that her child is already repeating the fifth grade. This made me realize my question was misunderstood. I meant for them to tell me, if their child is repeating, do they feel that this extra year will help them be ready for middle school. The non-retained group, for the most part, strongly disagreed, which leads me to believe they wouldn't want their child to be retained. Three of the parents of non-retained students answered in the affirmative that another year would help their child be ready for middle school.

The third statement of the survey was "My child feels good about school." From the parents of retained students, the responses were split. Two of them disagreed and three of them agreed with the statement. This shows me that students that are retained feel differently about school. Some may still really like it even though they are repeating the same grade, while others get turned-off of school. For the parents of non-retained students, the results were much more toward the positive with twelve agreeing, three disagreeing and two that weren't sure.

The fourth statement of the survey was "My child has a good chance of attaining his/her benchmarks and achieving well on the FCAT test." The retained group mostly agreed with this statement with one person somewhat disagreeing and one was not sure. The non-retained group responded the same way. I think the responses given were swayed by how parents think their child normally does on standardized and high stake tests.

The fifth statement of the survey was "My child feels good about him/her self." From the parents of the retained students, all agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. This is very important. It shows that being retained hasn't affected the students' self-esteem as far as their parents are concerned. The parents of the non-retained students responded the same way with the exception of two students.

Next, the sixth statement of the survey was "My child has friends in class." All the parents of the retained students responded that they agreed or strongly agreed. This shows that retention didn't affect their socialization and they were able to make friends regardless of being older than their classmates. The parents of the non-retained group basically responded the same way, with the exception of one parent who disagreed.

The last statement of the survey was "My child does his/her homework with prodding, without prodding, or not at all." The parents of the retained group were split, half of the parents said their child did homework with prodding, and the other half said their child did homework without prodding. These results may have nothing to do with how they approach school work, or how hard the work is for them to do, but more with study habits and self motivation. The non-retained group's results were also split in half. This also tells me that having to be prodded or not to do homework may not be affected by retention.

These parent surveys told me that most of the retained students feel good about themselves and have friends at school. Some of the retained students are doing better this year and feel good about school; while others who were retained don't feel as good about how they're doing this year or about school in general. This shows that retention affects children differently.

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Insert Table 2 about here

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Teacher Interviews with Retained Students

The following responses in quotations were taken from personal interviews I had with the retained students in my class (November, 2000). I interviewed Alyssa to see how she feels about school this year. When asked how she thinks she is doing in school this year so far, she responded "I'm doing better than last year, so I think I'm doing good." When asked if she thinks this year is easier than last year was, she responded "Uh-hum, a lot easier." When asked how did you feel when you found out that you would be in the fifth grade this year, she answered, "I don't know, I wasn't thinking about it." She told me that she hopes to go to college. She's proud of getting 100's on spelling tests. She said the toughest thing she had to deal with in school is Algebra. The best thing that happened in school is getting good grades. After talking to Alyssa, I left with a good feeling about how she feels about school and I feel that this extra year in fifth grade has been good for her. She is very positive about school.

The next child that I interviewed was Jeffrey. When I asked Jeffrey how he thinks he is doing in school this year so far, he told me that he felt great and that he does his work. He thinks this year is a little easier than last year was. When asked how he felt when he found out that he was going to be in the fifth grade this year, he responded "I felt that I'd never make it again." He

does think that he'll go to college. He's proud of being friends with people. The toughest thing he had to do in school is the Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test (FCAT). I feel Jeffrey has a good attitude about school and tries very hard, even though he doesn't always do well on tests. I find this amazing, especially with the negative attitude his father has showed me about his son being retained. I wonder if his father's attitude affected his feelings when he found out he was being retained.

The next student that I interviewed was Scott. When asked how do you think you're doing this year in school so far, he answered, "not really good". When I asked him if this year is easier than last year, he responded, "It's supposed to be, but there are new math books, so I hardly know anything and math and writing is what I was having trouble with last year." When asked how he felt when he found out he was going to be in the fifth grade this year, he said he was disappointed. When asked if he'll go to college, he said, "I don't know yet, I want to." When I asked what he is proud of, he answered, "Not really stuff I accomplished except my mom saying I'm a good kid." When asked what the toughest thing he had to deal with in school, he said when kids try to fight with him. When asked what the best thing in school was, he said when he walks away from a fight. After interviewing Scott, I was worried about his feelings about repeating the fifth grade and school in general. He doesn't try very much in class sometimes doing little or no work and doesn't show a positive attitude towards school. But after speaking to his second grade teacher and finding out he had the same problem back then, I realized it probably doesn't have anything to do with being retained. I also find it interesting that on the parent survey, his mother tended to be very negative. It makes me wonder how much of his negative attitude comes from her.

The next student I interviewed was Jennifer. When I asked her how she thinks she is doing in school this year so far, she answered, "O.K., I guess." She said that this year is easier than last year was. She told me that she wants to be a teacher when she grows up. When asked how she felt when she found out she was going to be in fifth grade this year, she answered that she was upset because she thought she did well last year. She believes that she will go to college. When asked what the best thing that happened to her in school, she answered, "being passed form fourth to fifth grade." I feel that Jennifer feels somewhat of a failure having to repeat the fifth grade year, but I don't think it will adversely affect her future. Jennifer is a child with a specific learning disability and sometimes has a difficult time with reading. Her mother agreed with the decision for Jennifer to repeat the grade.

My final interview was with Nickolas. He also has a specific learning disability and receives services for reading. When I asked how do you think your doing in school this year so far, he answered that he is doing a lot better than last year. He feels this year is easier for him to do his work than last year was. When asked how he felt when he found out he was going to be in fifth grade this year, he said that he wasn't shocked because he knew he was going to repeat the grade. His mom told him ahead of time. She was part of the decision made for him to repeat the grade, in fact, she was the one who wanted it. He thinks that he'll go to college. When asked what is something that you're proud of, he responded, "whatever I do in class." The thing that he said was the toughest thing he had to deal with in school was trying to make friends. The best thing that happened in school was being on the morning show, a closed circuit program the school does to start the day and acknowledge student accomplishments. Nickolas has a very good attitude and always completes his assignments, wanting to help others. Due to his

interview responses, I feel that retention was a positive decision for him and I know from conversations with his mother that she feels the same way.

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Insert Table 3 about here

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Analysis of Data Collected From Retained Students

The pattern that I see from the five surveys and the five interviews I conducted, is that when it comes to how the children who have been retained feel about having a second year in fifth grade, is they vary greatly from child to child. Their feelings about school also varied. These results could be due to factors other than just having been retained. How and when they were told about the retention could have affected their attitude. All the students, including those retained, felt good about themselves and had friends in school.

The parent surveys went along with what the students told me in the interviews. For example, a parent who responded on her survey that she didn't feel her child was doing better in school this year, appeared to have been reinforced by her daughter who responded "OK I guess" when asked how she was doing this year so far. Conversely, a parent that responded that her child is doing better academically this year on her survey matched her child who responded "I'm doing better this year, so I think I'm doing good" during their interview. It seems that the parents who responded positively had a child who also responded positively, and the reverse was also true. This makes me think that a parent's feelings very much affect how their child feels, in this particular case. There was one child that contradicted this statement. His father stated in his survey that he disagreed that his child feels good about school, but during the interview his son

told me that he feels great and does all his work. This was very surprising that the child feels good about school and is doing well despite his father's negative attitude.

Insert table 4 about here

Conclusions

A conclusion that I draw from looking at the research, parent surveys, conducting interviews, and looking at pertinent data is that retention results vary greatly among students. For some children, the extra year is helpful and they feel good about how they're doing in school, such as in Alyssa's and Nickolas' case. For other students, such as Jeffrey and Scott, the extra year isn't helping them academically and could be hurting their self-esteem in the process. It shouldn't be the great "cure all" for education and for those who don't attain certain benchmarks. For some students, it's helpful and they do better the second year on standardized tests and on their report cards. But for others, it may not help them do better academically and sometimes it can hurt their self-esteem and taint their feelings about school. Some children did the best of their ability during their first year in that grade, so another year probably will not make any difference academically and may hurt them socially.

One of the most important things I learned from doing this case study and other research that I have conducted on this topic is there needs to be more research done. There should be longitudinal studies done that look at long-term effects that retention may or may not have on students who are or were retained. There also needs to be many more studies done in different

socioeconomic areas to see where students are being retained the most and if that experience of being retained helped the children do better the next school year and in subsequent years.

Also because of such varying results where no definite answer can be said if retention is harmful or helpful, administrators and politicians that are pushing retention need to think long and hard, and base the decision to retain a child on individual circumstances considering their past history, their IQ and academic ability, parent's attitude, social skills and school work habits, before making the decision to retain a child. I feel that more longitudinal studies need to be done to see if there are any long-term effects of retention, such as dropping out of school. Also studies that look at what grade level students can be retained at that will cause the least amount of damage to a child's self-esteem and future school performance need to be conducted. There should be empirical studies done that look at test scores, future G.P.A., and other data to see how effective retention is on the following year. There also should be more case studies done to study specific schools and specific groups of children to get an in-depth picture of how well retained students are doing. These in-depth pictures would help administrators look more carefully at individuals and make informed decisions that would benefit the individual child.

Reflection on the Case Study Approach

Strengths of the Study

The strength of my case study on grade retention is that it offers deep insight and gives light to a very complex and controversial subject. It makes people think about the subject, possibly in a different way. This case gives specific examples of five children being retained in the same grade, showing how different their feelings, grades, and successes are. It also shows how parents can sometimes affect how their children feel about important things in their life.

Limitations of the Study

One limitation of this case study is it doesn't show the whole picture. The number of students is limited making results difficult to generalize. Another limitation of this case study may be that the students in the study were in my own class. Bias and being too close to the situation may have affected my analysis of the results. A larger study of different students that were not in my class may have been better.

My Final Thoughts

The subject of retaining a child, having them repeat an entire grade, is still a controversial subject where results are really not definite yet. I already mentioned there needs to be more research done on this subject. Administrators and politicians need to make decisions based on individual children, not blanket decrees and judgments, and possibly other avenues of helping children can be considered.

There needs to be experts at every school site that single out children who can possibly fail, and help the teacher give that child the extra help they need during the school year, not waiting until testing time or when promotion or retention decisions are made. Part of the principal's job is to provide academic and social counseling, which should include targeting those students that are having difficulties succeeding in class. Also principals need to design and implement programs that assess the students' needs and help improve student-teacher interaction. Teachers need additional training on how to reach individual students with so many children in their classroom. One way of helping students improve may be to implement cooperative learning where children learn from one another instead of only learning from the teacher.

If we can involve our students more in their own education instead of always trying to test them, maybe there wouldn't need to be retentions because students will be and feel

successful. The BIG question may be "Do we continue to retain a large number of children without knowing if that's what they need, or do we look for alternative approaches to reach those students that are having difficulties?

Author's Notes

I would like to thank my students and their parents for cooperating with me on this study and my principal for letting me conduct this case study. The names in this study and the name of the school are fictitious to protect the anonymity of my school and students. Due to the controversy and delicacy of this subject, I felt it was best to leave out the actual names of the participants of this study.

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Table Captions

Table 1. Test Scores of Students Who Have Been Retained

Table 2. Interview Questions Protocol for Retained Students

Table 3. Parent Survey about Retention Protocol

Table 4. Survey Results

Name	Test	Grade	Level	Score
Scott	FCAT Reading.	4th	2	284
Campbell	FCAT Math	5th	1	282
	Florida Writes	4th		2.0
Jennifer	FCAT Reading.	4th	1	100
Rhodes	FCAT Math	5th	2	297
	Florida Writes	4th		2.5
Jeffrey Stone	FCAT Reading.	4th	1	201
	FCAT Math	5th	1	254
	Florida Writes	4th		2.0
Nickolas	FCAT Reading.	4th	1	239
Green	FCAT Math	5th	1	245
	Florida Writes	4th		2.5
Alyssa Harper	FCAT Reading.	4th	1	266
	FCAT Math	5th	1	266
	Florida Writes	4th		2.0

1. How do you think you're doing in school this year so far?
2. Do you think this year is easier than last year was?
3. What do you want to be when you grow up?
4. How did you feel when you found out that you would be in the fifth grade this year?
5. Do you think you'll go to college?
6. What do you like to read?
7. What is something that you're proud of?
8. What do you like to collect?
9. What is the toughest thing you had to deal with in school?
10. What is the best thing that happened to you in school?

Please fill out this questionnaire and return it Monday with your child. This will help me to know where your child is and how I can help him/her. Thank you very much. Mrs.Rothstein

Directions: Circle the number that best shows your feelings about the following statements:

Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Not sure/ Not Applicable	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5

1. My child is doing better academically in school this year.
   1 2 3 4 5

2. I feel an extra year in fifth grade will help my child be ready for middle school.
   1 2 3 4 5

3. My child feels good about school.
   1 2 3 4 5

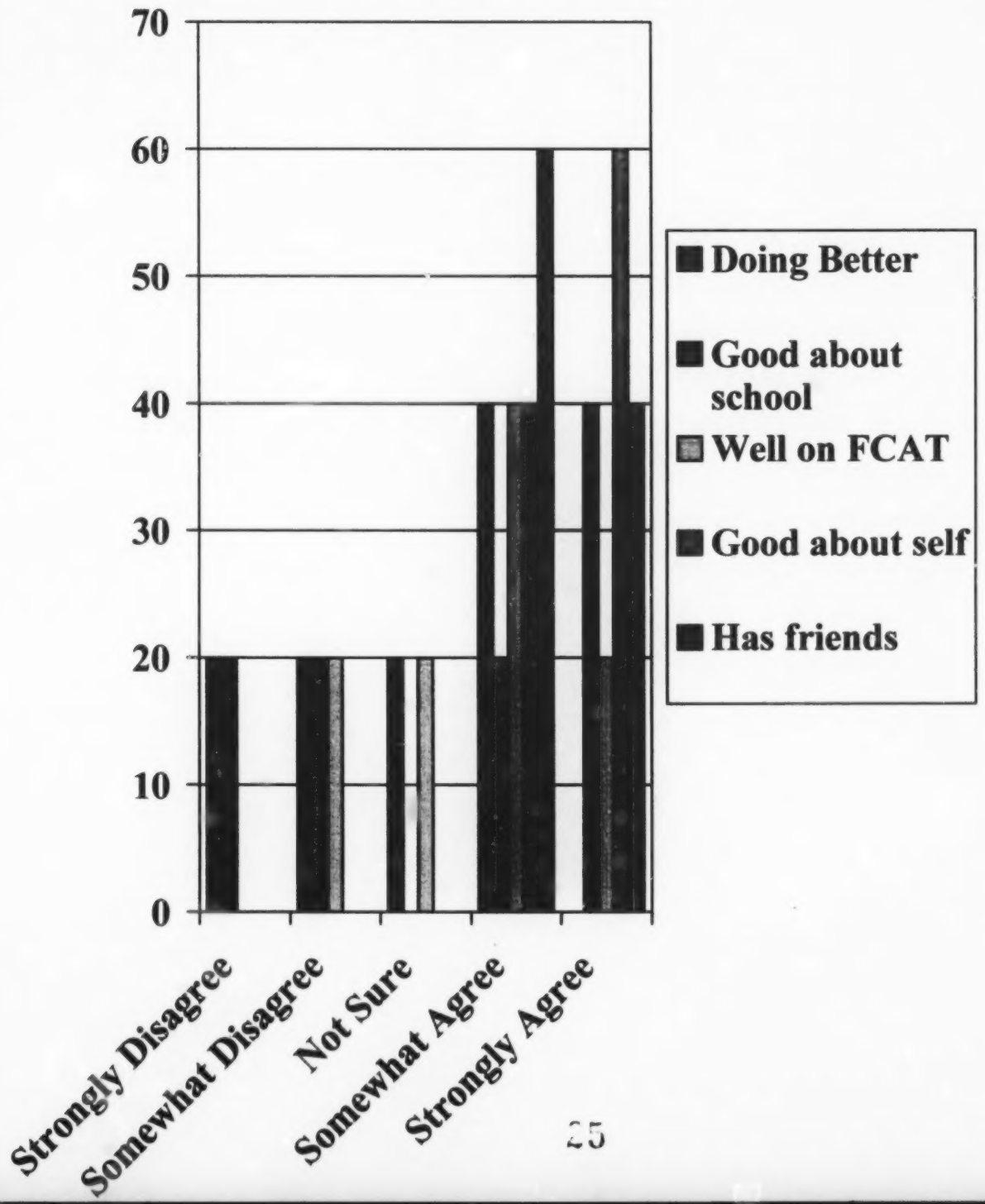
4. My child has a good chance of attaining his/her benchmarks and achieving well on the FCAT test.
   1 2 3 4 5

5. My child feels good about him/her self.
   1 2 3 4 5

6. My child has friends in class.
   1 2 3 4 5

7. My child does his/her homework _____
   With prodding without prodding not at all

8. Ways that I can help your child this year._____
_____
_____


70
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
Doing Better
Good about school
Well on FCAT
Good about self
Has friends
Strongly Disagree
Somewhat Disagree
Not Sure
Somewhat Agree
Strongly Agree